

Hepatitis B: What You Need to Know

Facts At-A-Glance

- Hepatitis B is a viral infection of the liver.
- The hepatitis B virus is transmitted through body fluids such as blood, semen, vaginal secretions and saliva.
- Hepatitis B can lead to serious liver damage including cirrhosis, liver failure and liver cancer.
- Many hepatitis B patients have no symptoms.
- As many as one in 10 Asian Americans have chronic hepatitis B.
- Among Asian Americans, the most common way of spread is from an infected mother to her child during childbirth.
- About 50-90 percent of those infected at birth or during infancy go on to chronic infection, meaning the virus persists in the body for decades and often for life.
- Vaccination is the best way to prevent hepatitis B and is recommended for all infants and children, as well as adults who are at risk of getting infected.

How is hepatitis B spread?

Hepatitis B is a disease of the liver that is caused by the hepatitis B virus, or HBV.

The virus passes from one person to another through body fluids, such as blood, semen, vaginal secretions and saliva.

Hepatitis B virus can be spread from a mother to her child during birth. Other common causes of transmission include:

- Sexual contact.
- Sharing needles among intravenous drug users.
- Sharing razors or toothbrushes.

Hepatitis B is NOT spread by:

- Hugging and kissing
- Coughing and sneezing
- Shaking hands
- Sharing cooking utensils

What are the symptoms of hepatitis B?

- Many people with acute hepatitis B, and most people with chronic hepatitis B, have no symptoms.
- When symptoms do occur they are often mild and may include fatigue, fever, loss of appetite, nausea, headache, muscle soreness, pain near the liver and jaundice (a yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes).

How is hepatitis B diagnosed?

- Hepatitis B is diagnosed with a special blood test.
- Hepatitis B virus is not found in routine blood tests.

Who is at risk of getting hepatitis B?

Anyone who is exposed to the blood or body fluids of an infected person is at risk of getting hepatitis B.

Children of immigrants from Asian countries where hepatitis B is common are at risk because the virus can be passed from mother to child during birth or from other household members, unless they received hepatitis B vaccine at birth.

You may also be at risk of getting hepatitis B if you:

- Are exposed to blood or bodily secretions on the job, as a first aid or emergency worker, firefighter, mortician, embalmer, police officer or health care worker
- Live in the same household with an infected person
- Have unprotected sex with an infected person or have more than one sexual partner
- Inject illicit drugs
- Get a tattoo in unsterile conditions

How is hepatitis B treated?

If you have chronic hepatitis B, you should see a doctor even if you have no symptoms. Your doctor will order blood tests to check if you have high or low level of virus and if you have mild or severe liver damage, to see if you should take antiviral medications. There are five FDA approved treatments for hepatitis B. These treatments can suppress the virus, decrease liver damage, and may prevent cirrhosis and liver cancer. Not all hepatitis B patients will benefit from these treatments, talk to your doctor to see if you need to be on treatment.

Even if your doctor thinks you do not need treatment now, you should still have blood tests regularly to monitor the level of virus and severity of liver damage. Your liver disease may get worse and you may need treatment in the future. Your doctor may also order tests to see if you have early stage liver cancer.

There is no special diet for patients with hepatitis B.

What is the best way to prevent hepatitis B?

Vaccination is the best way to prevent hepatitis B because it gives you long term immunity.

The hepatitis B vaccine is given in three doses at month 0, 1 and 6 months.

Vaccination is recommended for:

- All newborns, infants, children and teenagers.
- Health care and emergency workers
- Patients with chronic liver disease
- Sexual partners and household members of people with hepatitis B

What can I do to protect my liver?

- Do NOT drink alcohol.
- Do NOT smoke.
- Keep a healthy balanced diet and exercise regularly.
- Do NOT use any herbal medicines or medications that may harm the liver.